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## RATIONAL IMITATION<sup>1</sup>

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The purging of the mind from every kind of prepossession or prestige gives room for either *origination* or *rational imitation*. Now, origination, i. e., invention or discovery, is so difficult that it will always be the prerogative of the few. In a well-knit society, even those who have the originality to invent, find usually that someone has anticipated them, and learn from another what they might in time have found out for themselves. The frequency of nearly simultaneous origination by two or more persons proves how brief is the interval, after the discovery or invention is *ripe*, before it is actually made. This is why nearly every element in our body of culture has been propagated from *one* point. The youthful D'Alembert discovered for himself many theorems already known, but not for long was such genius allowed to run to waste. The ingenious shepherd lad, James Ferguson, who invented a clock, a watch, and a celestial globe, might, if he had stayed with his sheep, have devised many other contrivances already known to mankind. But even he was found and educated so that, instead of continuing to invent the invented, he enriched his fellow-men with the orrery, the tide dial, and the eclipsareon.

In *rational imitation* our attitude toward a practice depends in no wise on the prestige or discredit of those who have adopted

<sup>1</sup> Chapter from a forthcoming textbook on Social Psychology.

it or of the time and place of its origin, but only on its apparent *fitness*. Likewise our attitude toward a proposition depends solely on its appearance of truth, i. e., its *probability*. The rational imitator is not fascinated by the great man or the crowd. He is impressed neither by antiquity nor by novelty. He is as open to what comes from below him as to what comes from above him in the social hierarchy. He is *conservative* in that he keeps every precious inheritance from the past until he has found something better; he is *radical* in that he goes to the root instead of judging by mere surfaces. On the one hand, he regards the existing device or institution as a provisional thing that will some day be surpassed; on the other, he knows that not one out of ten innovations that sue for his favor is an improvement on the thing as it is. When the transforming forces are most active and society is in a dynamic condition, he will figure as a "heretic," "upsetter," or "disturber;" in the lull he will be called "mossback," or "obstructionist." For him, however, social life is always a process. Seeing everything in flux, he realizes the relativity of our dearest mental furniture, our moral standards, social theories, political philosophies, and party programmes. He distrusts yesterday's thought not as unsound, but as unfit for today's occasions. Most institutions he knows are in the grasp of a current of change which relentlessly antiquates not only the wisdom of the fathers, but even the conclusions of his own youth. Hence he combats the somnolence that creeps upon us in the thirties, insisting, though the years pass, that it is still forenoon and not too late to think.

The accumulations of changes on the rational principle is *progress*; of utilities, *practical* progress; of truths, *intellectual* progress. Moral progress and aesthetic progress do not come about essentially by origination and rational diffusion. Progress in these departments is usually the consequence of material or intellectual advancement. The sparing of captives began as soon as men reached the agricultural stage and were able to set their captives to productive labor. In our Northern states the abolition of African slavery seems to have come about in consequence of the general adoption of expensive farm implements which slaves

could not be brought to use skilfully or carefully. The improvement in the status of the wife flows from the necessity of making matrimony more attractive, now that so many industrial and professional careers are open to women. That militant ethical opinion which slashes now here, now there, laying low at each stroke some wrong or abuse, is the outcome of improvements in the apparatus of publicity. As cases of a moral advance that has been conditioned by intellectual progress may be cited: the humanization of punishments in consequence of the diffusion of scientific ideas of crime and penalty; the abandonment of judicial torture owing to the psychological demonstration of its futility; the restriction of child labor following upon our fuller knowledge of the bodily and mental growth of children; the introduction of safety appliances in industry after investigations unveiling the vast and bloody tragedy of industrial accidents.

There are certain elements of culture that tend to diffuse by rational imitation, viz., the *practical arts* and the *sciences*. To be sure, in each of these authority is recognized and followed. This could hardly be otherwise in view of the immense advantages of the specialist. But the foundation of such authority is not *prestige*, but *past success*. It is perfectly rational to treat as an authority in his line the general who has won every battle, the lawyer who has gained every suit, the physician who has saved every case; to withdraw some of our confidence from the civil engineer when his bridge falls, from the astronomer when his prediction fails.

Two causes can be assigned why rational imitation prevails more in the practical arts than in manners, dress, amusements, or the fine arts.

1. The spur of competition hastens the triumph of the fittest tool, machine, or process, but not of the fittest garment, ceremony, or sport. Armed with the lever of competition one progressive man can lift out of the rut the ninety and nine unprogressive men. One dentist practicing painless dentistry forces all other dentists. One manufacturer marketing safety bicycles coerces all makers of big-wheel bicycles. One nation arming

itself with rifled cannon compels other nations to throw their smooth bores on the scrap heap.

2. Exact measurement enables us to discover the better of two practical types—electric or cable cars, natural or creosoted railroad ties, overshot or turbine wheels, Jersey or Durham cows, alfalfa or timothy grass. But there is no means of exactly comparing the recreation afforded by bridge whist with that from diavolo, the fun of baseball with that of golf, the spell cast by the realist with that cast by the romancer, the thrill from Shelley's poetry with the thrill from Kipling's poetry, the pleasure from a Bougereau painting with the pleasure from a Manet.

It is owing to this difference that there are "schools" and "movements" in the fine arts, never in the practical arts. Thus we hear of the Della Cruscans, the Lake School, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the Symbolists, the Decadents, the Secessionists, the Aesthetes. In music there persist, side by side, Italian opera and German opera; in literature, the romanticism of Scott and Hugo and the realism of Balzac and Tolstoi. A great artist like Michael Angelo or Wagner becomes, in spite of himself, the founder of a school, the members of which, having no touchstone of discrimination, copy eagerly his faults as well as his excellences, and, moreover, being without any means of measurement, exaggerate his technique to the pitch of the grotesque. If, by a skilful disposition of lights and shadows on the nude figure, the painter suggests the knotted muscles that go with violent action, his imitators will make their lights higher and their shadows deeper in the hope of producing even greater effects. If the composer disfigures his work by introducing the *Leitmotif*, then his followers will sow their compositions with absurd *Leitmotifs*. All this because there is no way of assaying masterpieces and parting the gold from the dross. Criticism, to be sure, aspires to appraise by objective and universal standards, so that our acceptance or rejection of art methods or works may be rational; but the standards of one generation of critics are the mockery of the next, so that criticism is, after all, little more than one man's liking or dislike.

There are two causes why science diffuses in virtue of

rational imitation, but not theological, metaphysical, political, or ethical thought.

1. The application of a science in the practical arts tests the truth of its doctrines. Thus boring and mining test geology, practical sanitation tests pathology and bacteriology, synthetic chemistry tests analytical chemistry, while spectrum analysis, telephony, wireless telegraphy, and *X-ray* applications test the principles of physics.

2. In science every important statement must be *verifiable*. This it is that distinguishes the fabric of modern science from all previous fabrics, e.g., the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas. Science is credible, not because the intellectual power of its builders surpasses that of the Alexandrian philosophers or the mediaeval Schoolmen, but because of its *method*. Each of its great strides dates from some happy experiment or observation. Torricelli's experiment of balancing 32 feet of water against 30 inches of mercury ends "Nature abhors a vacuum." When Newton measured the relative velocities of sound and light, he put a quietus on the argument that we see the lightning before we hear the thunder "because sight is nobler than hearing." Galileo's detection of Venus's phases with his telescope gave the Ptolemaic system its *coup de grace*. Foucault's pendulum made visible the earth's rotation. The laboratory study of carbonic acid gas destroyed Agricola's theory that the suffocating gases in mines are the breath of malignant imps. Franklin's kite ends the vision of God "casting thunderbolts." The finding of half-digested fragments of weaker animals in the fossilized bodies of the carnivora upset Wesley's theory that the carnage now going on among the animals is the result of Adam's sin.

In consequence of this distinction there are "schools" and "movements" in philosophy, theology, political and ethical "thought," but not in true science. Individual scientists, like Haeckel or Weismann, may speculate, but science, while appropriating their verifiable discoveries, rejects their speculations. In philosophy we have the school of Plato and the school of Aristotle, the Realists and the Nominalists, the dualists and the monists. In ethical thought there are the followers of Tolstoi and

the followers of Nietzsche. In political thought there are the disciples of Rousseau and of De Maistre, of Webster and of Calhoun. In social philosophy we meet with Fourierites and Owenites, St. Simonians and Marxists, authoritarians and anarchists. In all these the prestige and authority of the great man come into play. But the genuine scientist wins no disciples, founds no school, leaves no personal impress. Nothing is taken on his *ipse dixit*.<sup>2</sup> The obituary notice of him in the journals of his science is cold and impersonal—his work, and the singleness of aim, close application, and intellectual power that made possible his work—that is all; nothing of his personal appearance or daily life, none of the sayings and incidents that are lovingly preserved by the disciples of the philosopher or the founder of a religion.

The practice of rational imitation grows and ought to grow. But its growth may be either *extensive* or *intensive*. In the one case the practice extends to new layers of the population; in the other, it invades new departments of thought and activity.

One great aim of all culture-diffusing agencies should be the increasing of the number of those who imitate rationally. Universal instruction, free libraries, high-class periodicals, college settlements, the exercise of the suffrage, women's clubs, experience in voluntary associations—all can play a part in emancipating people from blind imitation. It is not enough to break the yoke of custom. The radical spirit, coupled with political and social equality but without enlightenment, simply puts mob mind in the place of custom as lord of life. To justify itself democracy must be much more than a political movement, or even a social movement. Its goal is not attained by giving every

<sup>2</sup> Kepler's main reasoning as to the existence of a law for cometary movements was right; but his secondary reasoning, that comets move nearly in straight lines, was wrong. His successors verified the former and accepted it, tested the latter and rejected it. Says White (*History of the Warfare of Science with Theology*, I, p. 203), "Very different was this from the theological method. As a rule when there arises a thinker as great in theology as Kepler in science, the whole mass of his conclusions ripens into a dogma. His disciples labor not to test it, but to establish it; and, while, in the Catholic Church, it becomes a dogma to be believed or disbelieved, under the penalty of damnation, it becomes in the Protestant Church the basis for one more sect."

man a vote, or even an opportunity. It must include a great culture movement aiming to lift all to a plane of discrimination and rational choice. Then, whatever element gains control of society, the Dark Ages can never recur.

The *intensive* growth of rational imitation means the entrance of science with its verifiable statements into realms ruled hitherto by authority, tradition, or convention. We see it in the substituting of scientific hygiene for transmitted rules of ablution, propriety, and abstinence; of meteorology for empirical weather lore and the guesses of weather "wizards;" of psychiatry for doctrines of witchcraft and demoniac possession; of comparative anthropology for the legend of a "chosen people." An ethics basing its norms on human nature and the nature of the social organization is superseding the alleged commandments of Deity, the precepts of ancient sages, the customs of the fathers, and the edicts of Mrs. Grundy. Sociology, regarding the family as a purely social institution, to be constituted not according to tradition or ecclesiastical decree, or the intuitions of great writers, but with reference to individual happiness, social welfare, and race interest, promises to end profitless controversies as to whether marriage is a sacrament or a contract; bigoted denunciation and passionate defense of divorce; the "woman's sphere" dogmas; and the appeal to the prescriptive division of labor between husband and wife. The light from child study will guide in matters that have been the football between venerable pedagogic falsehood and sentimental faddism. A scientific economics, acquainted with human nature, the conditions of industriousness, thrift and enterprise, and the laws of group survival, and judging an economic institution not by subjective standards but by the way it tends to work out in the long run, will displace "natural right" dogmas and end the barren age-long controversies over the ethical basis of property, the morality of land ownership, and the rightfulness of interest or inheritance. A jurisprudence embodying a scientific apprehension of society's needs and of the relation of law to society, will thrust aside legal doctrines based on a primitive tradition, a remote code, the "wisdom of our ancestors," or the apocryphal "reasons"



offered by the commentators. Comparative politics, coupled with comparative legislation, will render it unnecessary to take as beacon the philosophy of some political sage, a Rousseau or a Burke, a Hamilton or a Jefferson.

In the practical arts, likewise, the blindly imitated is yielding to the reasonable or demonstrated. Each of the arts is, in fact, coming to be applied science. One has but to mark the intimate dependence of the practice of medicine on pathology, of nursing on hygiene, of plant and animal breeding on biology, of brewing on bacteriology, of cooking on chemistry, of fruit raising on horticultural science, and of farming on agricultural science.